
CENTRING SPACE: THE POSSIBILITY OF PLANNING IN URBAN COMMUNITY (SHEQU) CONSTRUCTION IN SHANGHAI

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China's post-economic reform industrialization, mass-migration and accelerated urbanisation has had an impact on cities that is unprecedented in scale and in speed. Either expressed by expansion patterns of industrial-driven peripheries, planned new towns or high-densification of city centres, urbanisation is defined by a profound transformation of urban space and prior socio-spatial orders¹. Largely impacted is the basic socio-spatial unit of the city - the urban community (xiaoqu or shequ) - often destroyed and relocated, and which have been the homes of people and traditionally the organisers of social relations in China². Communities are *centred* spaces - as centring is the making of space into a place³. China aims to build a new society, based on the neighbourhood unit, that can be more autonomous, responsible, and essentially more stable⁴. In a context where both society and space are on the move - how can planning assist *centring* space thus creating communities? This paper is a qualitative study that explored the history of a long-established community case in the inner centre of Shanghai - showcasing the present pressures of urban renewal and realities of spatial decay, overcrowdedness and relocation uncertainty. It argues for the importance of socio-spatial permanence, which requires the action of planning collaborating with community managers that is presently fragmented and lacking both diagnosis and communication.

Keywords

urbanisation, urban community, space and place, Shanghai

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INTRODUCTION: CHINA'S POST-ECONOMIC REFORM AND ACCELERATED URBANISATION

“Before being design, the urban form is intent: i.e. political vision or strategy”⁵

Cities are spatial expressions of our societies, and most importantly of our political economies⁶. Space matters and the materialisation of urban form is not arbitrary, and constitutes a significant interface between political economy and urban design⁷. Hence, the design of urban space is the design of the society. Urban space is a powerful tool for states for social and economic development – and in China, urbanisation is a key driver of present and future growth recognising that infrastructures, jobs, people, and income are concentrated in systems of globally, nationally and regionally interconnected city regions, which futures are subject to constant dynamic change⁸. Thus, China’s urbanisation progressively rises - yet, it faces many challenges like environmental degradation, agricultural land consumption, and population’s dislocation and spatial erasure, particularly in inner-city centres where large urban renewal has been occurring⁹. Historically, post-reform urbanisation is defined by three stages: firstly, the urbanisation led by rural industrialisation (1978-1987); secondly, urbanisation led by land reform (1988-2000); and thirdly, urbanisation led by the service industry (2001 to present)¹⁰; and these stages vary according to region¹¹. In Shanghai, urbanisation is defined by spatial expansion and peripheral industrial development in the 20th century and recently by a poly-centric and multi-layered urban structure guided by the Shanghai Master Plan (1999-2020) aiming to promote service industry and advanced manufacturing¹². It is known as the ‘1966’ master plan that designs a new urban structure based on ‘one city centre, nine new towns and sixty-six central villages’.

China’s modernisation project and political economy is based on a reterritorialisation project – i.e. a new nation-state that redesigns cultural and political territories in the name of global economic competitiveness¹⁴, which is based on the concept of ‘administrative economic areas’¹⁵. This reterritorialisation infers a prior deterritorialisation¹⁶. In anthropology, this concept means the loss of territory and of cultural identity that breaks with the link between state territoriality and society¹⁷. It implies the redesign of the society and the traditional organiser of social relations in China - the communities¹⁸. The Chinese state is fostering urban community construction through governance reforms (though a contradictory process within)¹⁹, so previous 12th Five-Year Plan put community building on the forefront of its priorities²⁰, and 13th Five Year Plan is moderating the pace of urban growth, setting a new type of urbanisation and enforcing a ‘people-oriented development’: “from now on, it will be mostly about the quality, efficiency and benefits of growth, rather than its speed”²¹. Until now, the production of space served an economic project and less attention was placed on planning and urbanisation – as drives of spatial change – impacting the communities and the reconfiguring of social space. China aims to build a new society, based on the neighbourhood unit, that can be more autonomous, responsible, and essentially more stable. For Shanghai, the communities are being redesigned into a new scale and identity, the one of “a modern metropolis and a global economic, financial, trading and shipping centre by 2020”²² and a “Highland of Talent”²³.

CENTRED COMMUNITIES - SPACE, PLACE AND URBAN CHANGE IN CHINA

Presently, Chinese cities observe a constant interplay between an increasingly unfixed physical dimension (demolition and expansion) and public sphere (relocation and migration). In this era of flow and instability, individuals need “a strong sense of belonging to anchor themselves in civil society and to identify with and accept the legitimacy of their political institutions”²⁴; and this sense of community or group belonging depends on what significant characteristics are shared in a given place and time²⁵. Places are “centres of meaning for individuals and these can span from the home to the neighbourhood, to the city and region, and to the level of the sovereign state”²⁶ and “the symbolic value of the built environment can linger for long periods, as a memory that is reinterpreted in the cultural and political idiom of the age, continually reproduced to fit evolving circumstances of the time”²⁷.



FIGURE 1 The two faces of China's urbanisation¹³ (2012).

So, space becomes place by creating meaning – i.e. *centring*²⁸. Centres are also connected to the notion of home and homeland, and people who believe they are at the centre “claim, implicitly, the ineluctable worth of their location”²⁹. Thus, *centred* urban communities can play a leading role in setting a stable society in China. For that task urban space matters, in its physical dimension, as meanings lie under the apparent superficial expression of urban form³⁰. Space has a multi-dimensional responsibility in spatializing communities (and territory), in contextualising and providing for identification amid people and their places³¹. This notion of rooted place has been challenged by Doreen Massey that argues for a new concept that is open and hybrid – as place is understood as a product of interconnected flows and of routes instead of roots³². It challenges the idea of place as a centre of meaning or rooted identity³³ as modernity faces constant mobility. Yet, if place is “an organised world of meaning” then it requires a static concept as if places would be in constant change then it would be impossible to develop any sense of place³⁴. Yi-Fu Tuan linked the notion of space to movement and of place to pauses in the movement³⁵.

China's urban transformation is questionable in sustaining local qualities, sense of place and identity. Old communities are disappearing and new ones are being formed. This dynamic is a spatial constant and pauses are hardly present in Chinese cities. Place loss is impacting communities' stability - which are linked to a particular set of social relations (community and family structure) and urban form. Thus, feelings of discontent and powerlessness - as “we have no choice”³⁶ - are transversal to the communities enquired³⁷. Socio-spatial relations are not being sustained in the long term and public trust is declining as residents don't feel urbanisation is operating on their benefit. By and large, communities' *decentring* will impact social stability and political identification, since it is based on local and national identity affections³⁸ hence threatening the success of China's ambition for a sustained social and economic development.





PERIODS	ANCIENT PERIOD	MODERN PERIOD			CONTEMPORARY PERIOD			
Years	7th century-1842	1842-1911	1911-1927	1927-1949	1949-1978	1978-1987	1987-1999	1999-now
Political context	Imperial rule	Qing Dynasty and foreign governance	Warlords and foreign governance	Kuomintang and foreign governance	Planned economy	Reform	Market-oriented	
Urbanisation waves	—	—	—	—	(19% urbanization)	Rural industrialisation	Land reform	Service industry
Administrative areas	1	2		3	4	5		
Plans	—	—	—	—	Shanghai Master Plan 1959	Shanghai Comprehensive Master Plan 1986	Shanghai Master Plan 1999-2020	
Duolun Rd in Hongkou district	—	possible founding ca.1893-1900 Previously called Darroch Rd	1927 map 	1932 map 	1948 map 	2006 map (see Fig. 4) 		

FIGURE 2 Table showing the periodisation of urbanisation, political context, administrative boundaries, Shanghai plans; and three maps showing the transformation of Duolun Rd in Hongkou district⁴⁵. Map on the left: shows the limits of the foreign concessions across time; map on the right: shows the transformation of administrative boundaries of Shanghai (from 1 to 5)⁴⁶; and location of Duolun Rd - DL.

A NOTE ON THE METHODOLOGICAL AND WIDER RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on the completed EU-FP7 URBACHINA research project at LSE that looked at sustainable urbanisation in China, which revealed that community construction is defined by a complex relation between planning, governance and the civil society³⁹. The research explored a total of 20 urban communities (Shanghai, Chongqing, Kunming and Huangshan) from which 5 were conducted by the author (Shanghai and Kunming). Cases selected were low-income neighbourhoods⁴⁰, old and new communities located at the inner-city centre and periphery respectively so a better understanding of the urban renewal and expansion processes are understood. The field work was conducted for eight months, four months in each city – two months in each community. However, this paper explores the case of Inner-Shanghai – the history of Duolun Rd – as an example of a long-established ('centred') community that was formed around the 1900s. Methods combine spatial analysis by mapping the transformation of the community in the history of planning and urbanisation in Shanghai, and an ethnographic approach (on-site observations, semi-structured interviews of 40 residents, planners and plan-makers).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLANNING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN SHANGHAI

Urban development in Shanghai can be divided into three main eras: firstly, the pre-modern era (from the 7th century to 1842) led by imperial rule; secondly, the modern era (1842-1949), when foreigner powers settled in parts of Shanghai; and finally, the contemporary era (from 1949 onwards) under the government of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)⁴¹. The contemporary period was directed by three main masterplans: i.e. the 1959 Shanghai Master Plan, the Shanghai Comprehensive Master Plan 1986 and the present 1999-2020 Shanghai Master Plan. The city development follows a poly-centric system that incorporates new towns and creates a new metropolitan area with inter-connected urban centres, and on the micro-level – through district and detailed plans⁴². The case study - Duolun Rd - is part of Hongkou district plan and Sichuanbei Rd Shequ detail plan. Hongkou district covers an area of 23.48 Km², and is the densest district in Shanghai - 36 299 person/sq.km - with

a registered population of 852.300.00 (from which 196.200.00 are floating population)⁴³. Primary planning goals aim to reduce population density and the construction of “Three Zones, Two Valleys and Two New Housing Estates”, which include the North Bund Shipping and Financial Service Cluster Zone, and the commercial and cultural streets in North Sichuan Road. The district is branded as “cultural Hongkou” and the home of “Shanghai-style culture”⁴⁴.

THE INNER-CITY CENTRE IN SHANGHAI: THE CASE OF DUOLUN ROAD IN HONGKOU DISTRICT

Shanghai is one of the most dynamic cities in the world, which makes it a difficult case to understand, plan and manage. The city is the result of centuries of encounter and exchange, and of destruction and rebuilt, thus its history is rich and diverse - still visible in people and in places. Yet, the aim for becoming an international financial centre in response to global economic competition has led to large urban renewal projects in the inner-centre and urban expansion led by the peripheral industrial development and the creation of the new towns⁴⁷. For the purpose of this paper, this is translated into the large destruction of old urban structures in the city centre and the resettlement of long-established communities (mostly low-income) into peripheral new towns. Moreover, Shanghai Municipal Government aims to attract the “new talents” so developing the city’s talent pool has been prioritised. Therefore, the pressure of urban renewal and the creation of a “new city image” is exemplified in the case of Duolun Rd.

On the other hand, rising migrant influx and the mitigation of inequality and low-income households’ necessity to decent housing⁴⁸ has led to severe housing shortage and the need for more public housing construction usually located in the periphery and new towns⁴⁹ (e.g. Songjiang district receives ca. 25% of the resettled population). Based on the wider study evidence, relocation has not been effective in Shanghai, neither in terms of community construction (satisfying governance aims) nor in fulfilling planning goals of population redistribution and inner-city demographic decompression⁵⁰. Large scale demolition of old communities in the inner-city centre and resettlement in the peripheries is leading to population substitution, not redistribution; and the lack of job opportunities for working-age population forces them to return to the inner-city centre⁵¹ further aggravating the population density problem. Thus, in solving a problem – the city is creating another. Shanghai’s ambition for becoming a global metropolis is creating many challenges for low-income communities and traditional lifestyles.

DUOLUN ROAD: “A STREET OF FAMOUS CULTURAL PERSONS”

Duolun Road is an old (and historical) community dated from the 1900s located in the middle of Shanghai’s Hongkou District and within the Shanyinlu Historic and Cultural Conservation Area, Sichuanbeilu Jiedao (sub-district) (Fig. 3). It is a case of public rent housing, and a clear example of Shanghai’s inner-city density and severe spatial decay due to lack of maintenance. It covers about 23.4 hectares and holds a number of important historic and cultural heritage places within the community, particularly dating from the early 1900s, which have significant meaning to Shanghai. The significance of Duolun Road is based in the history of China’s modern literature as authors such as Lu Xun and the “The Alliance of Left-wing Authors” such as Ding Lin and Rou Shi lived in the area. So, in 1998 the People’s Government of Hongkou District decided to reconstruct Duolun Road into “a street of famous cultural persons” and the area was object of an urban renewal project that has been partially completed. According to the plan and the rule “rebuild it as original”, the cultural and historical characteristics of old Shanghai were to be represented in this street by becoming “an open museum of Shanghai-fashion Buildings”. Duolun Road is seen as an epitome of the city’s spatial history thus a valuable case study, which is reflected in a Shanghainese saying: “Shanghai, a city of hundred years, can be seen in Duolun, a little street”. That being said, residents were unanimous in rejecting this new image stating that: it is “fake”, “for tourists”, “just face work”, “beautiful, but meaningless” and has “nothing to do with them”; while they have no identification with the new image, they are nonetheless proud of the history of the place.



FIGURE 3 Aerial view of Duolun Rd in Hongkou district: Liulin, Yong'an and Duolun xiaoqu(s) (2006).

LIULIN, YONG'AN AND DUOLUN XIAOQU(S)

Meanwhile, and coexisting alongside with “Duolun famous cultural street” the community is in fact defined by three distinct sub-communities, which have very different spatial patterns and are administered by different Juweihuis (i.e. residents’ committees): Duolun, Yong’an and Liulin xiaoqus (i.e. small communities), and together with Duolun Road they constitute the ‘Duolun Rd community’. Each xiaoqu is further defined by different sub-groups organised by specific spatial sub-units, which some of them are traditional Shanghai lilong: e.g. shikumen and new-style lilong (Fig. 4.0, 6.0). Liulin xiaoqu has two of these sub-units dating from the 1910s; Yong’an xiaoqu contains a large group of shikumen and a “new-style lilong” that was built ca. 1925 (registered as heritage in 2005), and Duolun xiaoqu has a small nucleon of both. Overall, Duolun Rd is organic in essence, and the remaining fabric is rather informal as houses were built by residents themselves without a planned structured around 1920s and the 1930-40s (amid Sino Japanese war). The overall community is a public rent housing (owned and managed by the state) primarily composed by poor and low-income residents and households pay in average ¥50 per month for a room with shared kitchen and toilet. Housing conditions are extremely deteriorated, overcrowded and often reaching dangerous levels of lack of hygiene and unsafe infrastructure like gas and electricity (Fig. 5.0). There are two main axes that correspond to vibrant commercial streets: i.e. informal vegetable market and the new commercial “street of famous cultural persons”, which are the main connectors within the xiaoqus and the wider city structure. The vegetable market is actively used by the residents on a daily basis and Duolun Rd is essentially used by tourists. The xiaoqus are internally defined by narrow alleys that are lively with people and little shops. The open spaces in the sub-units function as semi-private areas: e.g. in Liulin’s lilong these spaces are very well used for daily life needs and leisure like eating, cooking, washing and drying clothes, gardening, resting and reading, and some of the green areas are used to plant vegetables for personal consume. In short, Liulin, Yong’an and Duolun xiaoqus have their own socio-spatial dynamics, from which the lilong are particularly successful typologies for fostering social exchange. However, they operate in a rather isolated manner as social interaction occurs in the central vegetable market street where activities take place among all the residents.



FIGURE 4 Map on the left: Duolun Road in 1930s; map on the right: Liulin, Yong'an and Duolun xiaoqus administrative boundaries (in red), the non-heritage lilong in dark grey and heritage buildings in light grey.

Liulin, Yong'an and Duolun xiaoqus are spatially diverse, but socially they are relatively homogeneous as most of the local residents are low income working-class, retired and senior⁵². It was difficult to interview local residents of working age as explained by the elderly: "my children do not live here anymore; they are in better places with better housing conditions. The ones that can have moved out, only the old stay and the migrants"⁵³. Migrants account for a large portion of the community - ca. 40%, which sub-let from local residents at inflated prices: e.g. a room that costs ¥50 is rented to a migrant for ¥1000⁵⁴ or more. This is confirmed by the Juweihui thus showing a subversion of the public housing system and its social purpose, mutually consented. For example, Liulin's social structure is composed ca. 57% of retired, low-income elderly local residents and ca. 43% employed, low/middle-income young migrants, which coexist but don't really mix; and Yong'an and Duolun are similar. According to residents and a Juweihui member: "this area was supposed to be relocated many years ago (ca. 2003) and the relocation plan and development right was bought by a private company. However, this plan has been suspended for several years because the company has financial problems. Therefore, residents did nothing but to wait for the resettlement during these years. During this time, many residents came to the Juweihui to complain for the poor housing conditions. We went to Jiedao office and then the problem was given up to district government. However, the requirement of improving residents' living condition was rejected owing to the reason that this area is supposed to be resettled. Finally, several residents decided to go directly to the Shanghai municipal government, which is called "Shang fang"⁵⁵ in China". So officers from the municipal government came here and made the decision to approve the repairs"⁵⁶ on the shared spaces (kitchen and toilet), which were finalised in 2012.



FIGURE 5 Collage of Duolun Road spatial decay and crowdedness (e.g. a kitchen and migrants' shared room).

For the Juweihui, the recurrent problem is the lack of financial means – for managing the communities and for major repair or relocation⁵⁷. The neighbourhood is very old and repairs should have been done every 10 years, which did not happen because there were no funds - and “nothing will change unless the financial problems remain unsolved. There’s even no message from developers and the residents here are all quite worried about that”⁵⁸. The community situation is ambiguous as they are not entitled to major repairs nor resettlement, being able to sustain a minimum living standard with the small repairs. Moreover, officials have noted that managing the community is becoming harder since “residents’ component structure is becoming too complex”⁵⁹. And this causes a managing problem since “controlling is getting difficult” and Juweihui is burdened with tasks which “are not supposed to be our responsibility”⁶⁰. Regarding communication with planners (or plan-makers) Sichuanbeilu Jiedao (sub-district office) has confirmed that “we have nearly no connection with the planning bureau at the Qu (district) since we deal with the daily lives of the residents and not planning. Our work is about the social welfare”⁶¹.

Planners do confirm this situation, which some (on their own initiative) try to overcome: “generally, the bureau does not have the chance to hear the voices from the citizens, but I know the problems”⁶². Observe that, public participation was reinforced in the 2008 planning act but in practice citizens’ involvement is still small and communities are not diagnosed prior to the plan-making process or after implementation. Planning primary source are census and large population numbers⁶³, which are collected every ten years, thus highly deceptive due to the fast change of urban population. This is particularly problematic for Hongkou’s goals of reducing population density. Planners have stressed that the main problem of the district is indeed the rising demography – “the district has nearly 200.000.00 over population in relation to the predictions of the plan”⁶⁴ leading to the aggravation of housing and public goods shortages, and lack of jobs. Planning is struggling to solve these problems and according to planners – “we lack resources”⁶⁵ and numbers are hard to predict. Therefore, this problem of diagnosis could be reduced by the collaboration and formal sharing of data between community managers and planning bureaus.

By and large, local residents are happy to live in Duolun and the sense of belonging is strong and placed⁶⁶: “I like this place and don’t want to move. I love this kind of old architecture. I have a sense of belonging here”⁶⁷. In the sub-communities, residents’ main relations are within the immediate neighbours: “I belong here, yes! I know all my neighbours – they help me”⁶⁸; “I like it here because I am friends with my neighbours - my friends are all here”. Yet, these happen to be localised not only due to the long-term living but as many residents originated from the same work unit (*danwei*) and went to the same schools. In some cases, belonging was very strong due to previous ownership – “my grandparents bought this house with 10 golden bars!”⁶⁹, or “my parents moved here in 1946 and they bought this house with golden bars”⁷⁰ – so houses were often lived by three or more generations. In contrast, migrants have no sense of belonging to Duolun, which is linked to their original home. They expressed satisfaction with the neighbourhood since it is very “convenient” but think locals do not really integrate them: “they smile and

are nice, but we do not really communicate”⁷¹. Also, local residents feel increasingly disconnected due to the rising influx of migrants: “I have lived here for about 40 years, but recently I find that I hardly know anybody except my family members. I know nothing about my neighbourhood now! Residents move in and move out in a very high frequency and neighbours always change”.

Duolun’s fast social change is disruptive for the community, but even more problematic are the spatial conditions as these are severely deteriorated and overcrowded. Kitchen and toilets are communal and administered by the residents so often is “a mess” or “extremely dirty”⁷² (Fig. 5.0). Migrants are continuously blamed for disturbance and conflicts occur: “there are too many migrants! We endure a fast change of neighbours, and then we have a terrible environment – so dirty!”⁷³. The extreme shortage and housing decline led residents wishing to be relocated: “I belong to this xiaoqu, yes. I do. Our identity is old and traditional and I feel safe here. This place is more important to me than my place of birth as I have lived here for many years. But I want to move, I want to live in a better house – here we don’t have private toilet, and that is not good. I think some of my neighbours will come with me as we prefer the quality of the house so we will have to adapt”. Other types of narratives are found in local residents as the relocation into the periphery will bring other concerns: “I dislike the conditions here so I want to move. But I still want to live in the centre! So if the government wants me to move I will not sign the contract”⁷⁴. For most (particularly the old), the fundamental problem of resettling will be access to public facilities like hospitals and vegetable markets, and green spaces to exercise; additionally, many pointed out that socialisation with previous neighbours will be hard unless they choose the same residential resettlement. Yet, the ultimate concern will be to have their children and grand-children nearby. Local residents are very aware that working age family members will have to commute long distance to their jobs: e.g. Songjiang is ca. 1,5 hrs. away by underground. Thus, many choose to move back to the city and rent affordable rooms somewhere. In short, Duolun Rd case shows that not only the community is being fragmented, but the very basis of society – the family unit.

CONCLUSIONS

Duolun case provides a narrative of failure of both planning and governance structures⁷⁵, and a narrative of success on how to build community in China. For a long time Duolun Rd delivered the necessary spatial quality and stability – i.e. “moments of pause”⁷⁶ – that was able to design a rooted community with a strong sense of belonging: i.e. ‘centred’. It was able to accommodate several generations through nearly a century, and particularly the *lilong* continue to provide the everyday life spaces for communal interactions thus strengthening relations. Thus, urban space has a critical role in community building and in providing for identification amid people and their places⁷⁷.

Contemporary Shanghai observes a fast social change and flow of people as much as a spatial erasure and expansion: thus, both people and space are in a state of unrest. If China aims to build community, then it must change the path and pace of urbanisation. Urban planning can have a role in this intent by calling action on the importance of socio-spatial permanence – for the old communities and the new (to be). Moreover, securing long-term endurance will require a robust diagnosis – timely and contextual – of the communities and the understanding of both social and spatial structures. Planning is based on outdated demographic data thus lacking accurate diagnosis, and governance structures cannot respond effectively to residents’ maintenance needs and overall management. Both failures, called for civic action that petitioned directly to the municipal govern (the *shang fang*). Diagnosis, communication and contextualisation (social and spatial) are primary grounds for planning and governing cities and subsequently the society and economy. Thus, the support of formal collaboration and communication channels between governance and planning structures is fundamental as these are inter-dependent. In conclusion, the paper argues for the importance of socio-spatial permanence, which requires the action of planning collaboration with community managers that is fragmented, and lacking diagnosis and communication.

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- Figure 6 - Collage of Duolun Road showing the coexistence of two images and realities: i.e. the "street of famous cultural persons" where 'to be wed' people take photos daily (up) and the everyday life in one of the lilong in Liulin xiaogu (down).

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